

THE CHURCH A DANGER TO SOCIETY

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whole. In our island the danger that the Church would become too strong for the State had not been removed by the partial decline of the Papal power. To the tradition of spiritual domination, going back to the beginning of the Christian world, had now been added wealth which was daily growing, political influence, and social privilege. The attacks made on the Church at this period seemed only to show the weakness of her assailants. The danger to the State was not imaginary but real. The fate which Wycliffe feared for his country actually overtook *in* later years Italy, Spain, and to some degree France, where the clergy seized the helm of government and crushed underfoot political life and individual liberty.

Yet we may observe on the face of the fourteenth century, features which show that the spiritual domination of the clergy was weaker than of old, however strong their political and social status had become. We have already noticed that the interference of the spiritual courts in domestic life had ceased to be a vital reality and was rapidly becoming a contemptible farce, probably more on account of the altered mental attitude of the laity than for any other reason. We have seen a no less significant protest raised against the monopoly of State offices by churchmen. Above all, we have seen in the Wycliffite movement a direct attack on Church privileges and wealth, and a still more important attack on the doctrines which she taught and the religious usages which she inculcated. Her intellectual supremacy, now for the first time in our country seriously challenged, was the key to the position on which her worldly privileges depended. Wycliffe, in spite of some crudity of thought and utterance, was the only man of his age who saw deeply into the needs of the present and the possibilities of the future, and his life has had an incalculable effect on the religion of England, and through religion on politics and society. We may take this opportunity to give a brief outline of his career.

He was of North English parentage, and was born about 1320 in the Richmond district of Yorkshire. He was sent to Oxford, but when and how is unknown ; the attractions of